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Social Systems and Translation

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1. Early Systemic Thinking

Translation has always been implicitly or explicitly associated with structures larger than itself: it was considered as a factor in exchange between languages, cultures or semiotic domains. The “Manipulation group” and polysystem theorists theorised translation in system-theoretical terms in the wake of literary structuralist and systemic studies (the Russian Formalists and the Prague Linguistic Circle) (Even-Zohar 1979; Hermans 1985; see in detail in Polysystem theory and translation*).

Inspired by the systems thinking of polysystem theorists, André Lefevere theorised translation as a form of rewriting practiced within a literary system, itself a part of a complex system of systems—a culture (1992; see Cultural approaches*). Lefevere’s theory was also influenced by the German literary systems theorist Siegfried J. Schmidt. In his research, Schmidt applied Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory (see below), which did not consider human actors as part of social systems. Schmidt, however, introduced human agency into his theory of literary systems (1998). So did Lefevere, for whom the system is a series of constraints; yet the translator-rewriter retains freedom to act either according to or against constraints. Constraints are imposed both from within and without the literary system. Poetics is an example of internal constraints; ideology is an external constraint coming from political or religious authorities. The aesthetic and ideological constraints are closely linked and this is how the literary system is joined to the social system within which it is embedded.

2. Social-Systemic Paradigms

Although systemic thinking was quite prominent in several translation theories of the cultural turn, it is within the sociological turn that specifically social-systemic approaches have moved centre stage (see Sociology of translation*). There are two main kinds of sociological systemic paradigms—those focussing on systems as macrostructures above the human level and those focussing on systems or networks as microstructures formed by human actors through social interactions.

Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann considered society to be composed of macrostructural units. These two scholars have provided much inspiration to translation students, yet they are by no means the only macrostructural sociologists whose theories have been applied to the study of translation. Building on Luhmann’s notion of the social system, Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action studies the relationship between the Lifeworld, the basis for cooperative communicative action, and the bureaucratised System in modern society. There has been an attempt to trace the Lifeworld-System relationship in present-day translator training (Tyulenev 2012b). Anthony Giddens studies social systems in the context of globalisation. His theory has

been applied to the study of the translation of news (Bassnett and Bielsa 2009; see also Globalization and translation*). Translation has been studied as a factor in another type of social macro-systems—in a world-system. The world-system theory is a perspective introduced in sociology for the analysis of international relations, especially in terms of inequalities and centre-periphery dynamics (Shannon 1996). This social-systemic theory has been used to examine international translation flows and the role translation plays in various local and national contexts (Heilbron 1999). Another approach is to look at the role translation plays in the emergence of social systems from the viewpoint of complexity theory (Marais 2013).

In contrast to macrostructural theories, the microstructural approach views social reality as networks developing from ‘below’, on the level of interacting individuals. This approach is prominent in Bruno Latour and Michel Callon’s actor-network theory, which has been applied to translation studies (see Agents of translation** and Models in translation studies***).

Since the Translation Studies (TS) research based on theories developed by Habermas, Giddens, world-system and complexity theorists is only at an initial stage and the relationship between Bourdieu’s theory of social fields and the actor-network theory is not straightforward, what follows focusses primarily on Luhmann’s social systems theory, directly working with the notion of social systems.

3. Translation as a Social System

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory (SST) allows translation to be viewed as a social system or a subsystem, part of a larger social system. Luhmann theorised modern society as a system consisting of subsystems with their distinct functions (‘function subsystems’), such as religion, politics, education, art, translation.

Andreas Poltermann was the first to apply SST to the study of translation (1992). He concentrated on literary translation as part of the national literary subsystem (cf. polysystem theory), which is a subsystem of art, which is a subsystem of the social system. Later Theo Hermans considered translation mostly as a system in its own right (1999: 137–150). Another attempt to apply SST was made by Hans J. Vermeer (2006). Both Hermans and Vermeer applied Luhmann’s theory as a sideline to their research. For Hermans, SST provided inspiration for deploying a new conceptual apparatus (Hermans 2007: 111); Vermeer explored SST in the hope of deepening his skopos theory (see Functionalist approaches*). A fuller monographic treatment of SST in application to translation both as a system and as a subsystem was carried out in Tyulenev 2012.

In a nutshell, Luhmann sees the social system as separated from its environment, everything that is not the system, by a boundary. All social systems are self-reproducing (autopoietic) systems. Luhmann distinguishes between biological, psychic and social systems. Human beings are at the intersection of three systems: biological (body), psychic (mind) and social. Luhmann interprets society as a communication system, comprised of communication events, rather than a collection of individuals. Each social function subsystem has its own communication—its own type of operations governing relationships between its elements. Social systems are operationally closed, yet they do

interact with one another.

Translation can be described as a social system, because it can be shown to have all the properties of a social system. Translation has its unique element, namely the translation communication event (TCE), comprised of two or more communication events connected through mediation. The simplest TCE involves three parties (not necessarily three individuals!): $A < > B < > C$, where A and C are parties interacting through the mediator B in both directions. A and C come from the environment and only B belongs to the translation system: only in B can the operational nature of TCE be observed. B understands A's utterance in the sense that it chooses only a few of all possible pieces of information extractable from A's utterance. B's understanding becomes the utterance that reaches C. Out of all pieces of information extractable from B's utterance, C also selects a few and this constitutes C's understanding. Schematically, $A: \text{Utterance}_1 > \text{Information}_1 \cong B: (\text{Understanding}_1 = \text{Utterance}_2) > \text{Information}_2 \cong C: \text{Understanding}_2$. TCE and the conditions of its performance are the focus of TS as an academic discipline. TCE allows both the identification of translational phenomena, despite the multitude of its forms, and the conceptualisation of translation, despite its diversity.

Every social system has its function, efficacy, code, programmes and medium. Translation's function is mediation. Translation ensures social interaction across boundaries; this is its efficacy. Translation treats all phenomena as either mediated or unmediated. This is the basic binary systemic code of translation. For instance, in the case of interlingual interaction, translation sees any text as either translated or not. Translation also has flexible programmes reflecting changes in the mediation policies from culture to culture. Finally, each TCE has its medium, out of which it is formed. Translation uses different media depending on the semiotic domain within which it occurs: language is the medium of interlingual translation; colour is the medium of the intersemiotic translation in painting.

Translation qua system has its subsystems—networks of relations between elements. For example, intra- and interlingual and intersemiotic subsystems are commonly distinguished. Within those subsystems, still smaller bundles of relationships may be singled out—subsubsystems (legal translation in the interlingual translation subsystem).

4. Translation in the Social System

As a next step, translation should be viewed as a subsystem of a larger social system—another social-systemic formation (it would be a mistake to identify social systems exclusively with nation-states!).

Translation facilitates interaction across boundaries—both intra- and intersystemic. Therefore, translation is a social boundary phenomenon: it is 'located' and functions on boundaries. While mediating between two systems, translation does not become a third system. Translation is always an integral part of one of the interacting systems. SST sees the system-environment interaction as a dyadic relationship. The boundary is a liminal phenomenon belonging to the system, rather than an independent separate entity. The boundary stabilises the difference in degree of complexity between

the less complex system and the infinitely complex environment (Luhmann 1995: 29, 504 (n. 49)). Thus, translation's allegiance is to the system commissioning its activities.

SST offers a fresh way of theorising the relationship of translation and power. Modern societies are function systems; each function subsystem is unequal to the other subsystems by dint of having its unique function. The only property shared by function subsystems is inequality: they are equally unequal. Social systems are multipolar; this has ramifications for the distribution of power in society. Power is one party's influence over another's decision-making ability. There is, for instance, an undeniable influence of the function subsystem of politics over business, education, art and translation, yet this influence is never absolute, the reason being that politics needs the other function subsystems because it cannot do what they can do. Hence, all subsystems are interdependent. Translation is no exception: translation may act at politics' beck and call, but also it can undermine political regimes.

5. Negotiating between Structures and Agents

Although significantly different from Luhmann's SST, Bourdieu's theory of social fields, actively applied in TS (see in detail in *Sociology of translation**), converges with SST in seeing society as composed of system-like social spaces, namely fields. Fields are relatively autonomous, yet interconnected areas of activity (1990: 87–88). Bourdieu's structuring of social space is comparable to the Luhmannian social system with its operationally closed and interactionally open subsystems (Tyulenev 2012: 206–207).

Bourdieu attempts to overcome the dichotomisation of social reality as an opposition of social institutions (structures) and individuals (actors or agents) and allows the researcher to analyse relations between structures and actors. A similar perspective is found in Giddens' structuration theory (1984) and Bernard Lahire's sociological theory showing the social world on the scale of individuals (2013: 11; see an application to translation studies in Meylaerts 2008). Such theories attempt to strike a balance in describing the relationship between structure and agency.

Such theories also link macrosociological and microsociological visions of translation. Microsociological theories attempt to study the social at the grass-roots level (see *Ethnographic approaches**). Rather than trying to conceptualise ready-made systems, these theories study how social actors create social networks. One of such theories, the actor-network theory (ANT) developed by Latour and Callon, has been discussed in application to translation (Buzelin 2007; Bogic 2010).

Latour and Callon call their theory a "sociology of translation." They conceive of the term 'translation' in a sense broader than that used in TS. Translation for them is a process in which agents recruit other agents into their projects. In TS, the angle of application of ANT is different, since translation is understood as interlingual transfer and networks are projects involving 'translation proper' (Jakobson). ANT has proved helpful in describing the role that translators play in publishing (together with commissioners, authors, editors, etc.).

6. Why Study Translation in Relation to Social Systems?

Studying translation as a social activity has led to considering it as part of social systems, whether on the macro- or micro-scale, and as a social (sub)system *sui generis*. Such a view of translation is productive for several reasons. It shows translation's natural social habitat: translation is never practiced outside of social systems. Social systems theories also help us substantiate TS's claim that translation is a unique social activity deserving to be studied as such. Translation's uniqueness makes it equal with other social activities. Systemic views of international communication, such as those conceptualised by world-system theory (similar approaches have been developed based on Bourdieu's and Luhmann's theories, see Sapiro 2008; Tyulenev 2012c: 201–224) help to explain international translation flows and differences in the consumption of translation products. The sociologically-informed theorisation of translation should not necessarily be carried out using only one social systems theory. Social-systemic theories form a continuum between structure and agency. With due methodological care, moving between these two poles allows one to zoom in or zoom out on translational phenomena.

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